ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 11 - Book World

WASHINGTON POST
6 FEBRUARY 1983

Who's Afraid Of the Big Bad Brecht?

BRECHT IN EXILE. By Bruce Cook. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 237 pp. $17.95

By DAVID RICHARDS

IT WOULD probably be putting too heavy a responsibility on the 11 essays that constitute *Brecht in Exile* to say that they are concerned with the desanctification of a shrine. But Bruce Cook, a former movie critic, book review editor, and a self-confessed "literary hustler," is not exactly given to genuflections in his study of playwright Bertolt Brecht, especially the years 1933 to 1947 that Brecht spent outside his native Germany.

While Cook may be exaggerating the perils of this undertaking by noting that "any writer who today treats Brecht as simply another writer invites the wrath of the entire Brecht establishment in all its academic pomp and theatrical glory," he is definitely taking an unfashionable viewpoint in this slender, sometimes provocative volume.

The broad public knows Brecht, if it knows him at all, as the author of *The Threepenny Opera*, although it could be argued that every time Ella Fitzgerald sings "Mack, the Knife," a little of Brecht continues to get through. In the academic theater community and certain regional and experimental theater circles, however, Brecht has long enjoyed quasi-divine status—not merely as the author of such plays as *Mother Courage, Galileo, Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, but also as the creator of a cool, didactic "epic" theater style that flew directly in the face of 20th-century naturalism.

Perhaps only Samuel Beckett occupies as lofty a pedestal these days, but Beckett is the ultimate recluse, the lonely metaphysician locked into an increasingly stark vision of the universe. Brecht was and is the model of the engaged playwright, a theoretician and tactician for the theatrical left. For the keepers of the flame (critics Eric Bentley and Martin Esslin, chief among them), he inspires a devout faith. If you believe that the theater can rectify social ills, effect political change, instruct and mold the human being, then you are apt to believe deeply in Brecht. And here is Cook, admitting at the very outset that he has difficulties with "a good deal" of the playwright's work and confessing that "the more I learned about Brecht the less I liked him."

Because he created such stunning roles for actresses, Brecht's feminist credentials are thought sound. And yet Cook advises us to think of him "as a sort of Typhoid Mary of misfortune, carrying it with him wherever he went and spreading it like a disease. . . . If, in general, he was bad news to those close to him, then he was a walking disaster to the women in his life. Death, attempted suicide, mental disorder, alcoholism—these were Brecht's benefactions to his mistresses."

The canon holds that Brecht was a willing collaborator, who could rise above the petty notion of individual authorship and actually favored a kind of collective creativity involving composers, actors, fellow authors and even his many mistresses. And Cook? The polite term for the sort of collaboration Brecht engaged in, he says, is "brain-picking" and he suggests that the playwright was indecently hasty to appropriate the good ideas of others.

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It was the rise of the Nazis that sent Brecht, an ardent Marxist and communist sypathizer, into exile in 1933, first in Finland, then later in America. Six of those years were spent in Southern California where he was part of a particularly rich community of German and Austrian emigré intellectuals that included Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Arnold Schonberg and Peter Lorre. The most interesting passages of Cook's book deal, in fact, with the expatriate colony that gathered at a weekly salon in the home of Salka Viertel, a writer and hostess whose friendship with and influence on Greta Garbo gave her a certain clout in the film industry.

Cook recounts in often interesting detail Brecht's one protracted effort at Hollywood screenwriting, the Fritz Lang film "Hangmen Also Die," and manages at the same time to debunk the notion that Brecht was a cinematic force to be reckoned with. "Juxtapose three words—Brecht and film—and you have an in-

stant symposium, perhaps a book, at the very least an article for *Sight and Sound*," he writes. "What is it about this conjunction of maker and métier that so inspires critics and scholars?" And a chapter on the premiere of Brecht's "Galileo" at the 260-seat Coronet Theater in Los Angeles is as colorful as that event now seems unlikely. Charles Laughton starred in the title role; Joseph Losey directed a cast that ran to 50; Brecht frequently lost his temper during rehearsals and the opening coincided with a massive heat wave. "Imperfect though it may have been, racked by dissension though it certainly was, the production nevertheless appears in retrospect to be the most important single event of the exile years," Cook concludes.

At the end of World War II, Brecht began thinking seriously about going home to Europe. A subpoena to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee, which was investigating subversive influences in the film industry, no doubt hastened his decision. Brecht apologists generally view his appearance before the committee on October 30, 1947, as a triumph of peasant canniness, irony, clever double talk and obfuscation. Esslin, for one, has said it was "as though a zoologoist had been examined by apes." In what may be Cook's severest assault on the legend, the playwright is presented instead as frightened, nervous and apprehensive. "Was Brecht in command?" Cook asks. "Certainly not. Did he lead the Committee by its collective nose? Of course he didn't. When he came away from the witness chair he must have been quaking inside. . . . In any case, he was emotionally spent by the time he left the Capitol." The following day, Brecht left the United States permanently.

For all the controversy Cook clearly wants to stir up with these related essays, it is surprising that *Brecht in Exile* is not livelier than it is. While he has relied on some first-hand interviews and the unpublished files on Brecht kept by the CIA and FBI, Cook has produced what he himself acknowledges is "for the most part a book written from other books." He may have set out to tilt with the academics who guard the Temple of the Holy Brecht, but he doesn't always succeed in avoiding their dryness or their dust. More force than is mustered here is required to get the Brecht partisan to change his stance, or the layman to take one.